DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 265 258 UD 024 658

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TITLE Educational Issues in Contemporary Japan.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 13p.; In: Comparative and International Studies and the Theory and Practice of Education. Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the Australian Comparative and International Education Society (11th, Hamilton, New Zealand, August 21-24, 1983). See UD 024 646.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Entrance Examinations; College Students; Competition; Educational Practices; Educational Quality; *Foreign Countries; *Higher Education; Private Colleges; Secondary Education; Student Educational Objectives
IDENTIFIERS *Japan

ABSTRACT

For many outsiders, Japanese education evokes a picture of exaggerated competitiveness. The whole educational process tends to be aimed at the university entrance examination, and this emphasis imposes formidable psychological pressure on young adolescents. Preoccupied with preparation for the upper schools, Japanese educators seem to have forgotton the task of achieving the full development of individuals. This situation results, in part, from the severe competition for admission to Japan's higher-ranking universities. Regardless of family background and birthplace, a student is almost guaranteed a better life if he or she gains admission to a more selective school. Recent reform efforts, such as the 1979 University Entrance Reform, offered merely incremental changes. Once accepted at the University, however, a student's life is relatively undemanding; the function of the universities is social selection, not education. Although 76.8% of university students attend private institutions, most of Japan's private universities are poorly funded. Thus, most students study under poor conditions and pay more for less education. Finally, Japanese universities are isolated at the inter-department, inter-university, and international levels. In hiring staff, preferential treatment is always given to school alumni, and departments tend to be mutually exclusive. Moreover, the number of foreign teachers and students at Japanese universities is significantly small. (KH)

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EDUCATIONAL ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

by

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CS004658

Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Comparative and International Education Society (11th, Hamilton, New Zealand, 21-24 August, 1983).

EDUCATIONAL ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE EDUCATION

KAORI OKANO

1. INTRODUCTION

Japan opened her door to the West in 1868 after three centuries of isolation policy. In 100 years since then she has become one of the highly industrialised nations. Among others, education, which was expanded as rapidly as her economy, has been regarded as one of the important factors contributing to the national development. It was believed that greater numbers of well-educated people would improve productivity and welfare. Thus, few had had any doubts about 'expansion of education' in Japan. However, the radical student unrest in the late 1960s made a few educationalists begin to question the expansion. There are still many issues which are widely discussed in Japanese education.

This paper is an attempt to examine two educational issues which contemporary Japan, 'a late-developer', faces, as a result of, or in spite of, its rapid expansion. After a brief description of quanitative aspects of Japanese education, two main issues are discussed; entrance examination systems and higher education.

Since 1945, the American single-track system has been adopted. Starting at the age of six, children go through 9 year compulsory education, i.e. 6 ycars primary and 3 years junior high school. Almost 100 percent attendance has been achieved. Upon completion of the compulsory education in 1980, 94.2 percent of 15 year olds went on to senior high school through entrance examinations. In the same year, 37.9 percent of those who attended senior high school proceeded to higher education. The illiteracy rate was 0.7 percent in 1970, one of the lowest in the world (Foreign Press Centre, 1981: 88). Japanese teachers spend more time on in-service training than their American counterparts (Morimoto, 1982), and Japanese students attend schools more days a year than American students (Schiller et.al., 1982).

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II. TWO ISSUES

(1) ENTRANCE EXAMINATION SYSTEM

Due to the many articles written on the topic in magazines and papers, Japanese education evokes for many outsiders a picture of exaggerated competitiveness. The 'examination hell', a term describing the strenuous preparation for the examination, has existed for so long that many Japanese now take it for granted. However, it does not mean that people do not question it. In fact, many do.

This is a problematic issue, although some groups do not regard it as a serious problem. For example, many prosperous educational industries catering for students such as jukus, preparatory schools and publishers cannot survive without the system. Industries and government offices rely on the clear-cut hierarchy of universities in their recruitment. Thus, the examination functions effectively for some groups of people. However, it is problematic for the following reasons.

First, the whole education tends to be aimed at the university entrance examination which in most cases requires a large amount of knowledge. Much of the training in senior high schools, especially 'good' schools which send many students to 'good' universities, is devoted not to learning or developing students' inner capability but only to preparing them to pass the examination. In some cases even at primary and junior high school levels the preparation to the next step is emphasized.

The preparation is also emphasized after school hours. There were about 50,000 'jukus', cramming schools, in 1977 and that 27 percent of six graders and 28 percent of junior high school students attended jukus after school (Shimahara, 1979: 86). The prosperity of the after-school drilling at the 'juku', and of home-tutors casts a shadow on the assumption that the university entrance examination provides a fair opportunity for open competition based on the criterion of achievement. Those who receive costly drilling tend to be advantaged. In fact, the recent survey shows that average income of parents of students of national universities, which in general are more difficult to enter, is higher than that of students at private uni-

versities (Japan Times Weekly Jan. 29th, 1983). This is contradictory since the tuition fee for private institutions is much higher than that for public institutions. Rich families send children to inexpensive and well-equipped universities while relatively poor families have to send children to expensive institutions with poor facilities. If they are unlucky enough to fail the entrance examination which is held only once a year, they spend another year or sometimes 4 or 5 years at a preparatory school. These students are called 'rounin' whose literary meaning is a masterless samurai in the feudal era. Rounins constitutes nearly 40 percent of all applicants (Shimahara, 1979: 169).

Second, the entrance examination imposes on young adolescents formidable psychological pressure. The supreme example of the outcome of this tension is suicide as an escape from the examination or from miserable fear of failure. Self-discipline, hard work and tenacity are required for students. Concerning this, however, Shimahara (1979) argues that the entrance examination is a critical 'rite of passage' to adulthood, since it requires intense involvement; self-denial, determination and above all the resilience to adopt a certain cognitive and motivational orientation to society. It may indeed offer those who succeed in it a learning experience culminating in adult ability to adapt, but to those who do not, the failure may be traumatic and lead to radical and violent reaction.

Entrance examinations exist in many other societies. Australia has the Higher School Certificate examination. Why, then, is the competition more intense in Japan?

First, there is a strong belief that formal education determines which career patterns one qualifies for, i.e. one's status in Japanese society. It is no exaggeration to say that an examination at the age of 18 determines the whole life of a person. Second reason for this competition is the clear hierarchy of about 1000 universities and colleges in Japan. Factors affecting rank are; whether the university had status under the old system or not; whether it is national or private; whether it has a graduate school or not; whether it is a university or college (Shimbori, 1981: 238). At the top of the hierarchy is Tokyo University which sends the largest number of graduates

to government ministries. Some government offices and the management echelons of larger companies are monopolised by graduates of a few universities which rank in the upper part of the pyramid. Third, the public in general believes that the examination is one of the most objective ways to select capable people. Since the Meiji restoration, examinations to the upper schools have selected leaders of Japanese government and industries regardless of family background and place of birth. However, it is irrational that the entire career of a person is determined at the tender age of 18 by the examination which tests only a limited area of knowledge.

The 1979 University Entrance Reform initiated by Education Minister Nagai, a former Professor of Sociology of Education, was a challenging initiative in this well-argued area. Two identifiable faults to overcome were: (1) since each university formulates its own questions in isolation, the content of high school education becomes of almost secondary importance; (2) each university uses objective tests which stress routine memorisation (Nagai, 1977: 307). Under the new system, those who desire to enter national universities sit the universal test consisting of seven subjects as a first step. Knowing the score of the first test, students apply for respective universities which also offer an individual test as a second step. Assessment is based on the two examinations, although each university adopts different criteria.

The Unified First Test which is based on the secondary school curriculum and encourages critical acumen was expected to correct the above faults. However, it was far from successful. First, the hierarchy of universities become apparent from their respective minimum acceptance scores. Another unexpected outcome was an increase of applicants to private institutions and decrease to public ones (Mainichi Shinbun, April 9th, 1983). This is mainly because the reform was implemented only in public institutions, excluding private ones which constitutes 77.9 percent of all higher education institutions. Some students see seven subjects for the Unified Test too much burden, compared with three for private universities. Other relatively bright students who used to make a public university as their second choice. And the examinations for private universities have not changed at all in the reform.

The failure of the 1979 Reform teaches us that merely incremental changes within the education system will not have significant impact. As long as people believe in the close link between an admission to 'better' universities and membership of certain groups in society, and as long as the hierarchy of universities exists, major changes may not be expected.

The link has been perpetuated in two ways; first, by 'nepotism' based on the university one attended. In recruiting, larger companies favour graduates of certain universities which their executives attended. Thus, large companies have been monopolised by certain universities. Second, government ministries conduct 'objective' examinations, the result being, however, that most of the successful applicants come from certain universities. Those who are good at entrance examinations also perform very well in the similar examinations of recruitment.

One possible measure would be a comprehensive reform in recruitment, initiated by the government so that graduates of certain universities cannot be favoured by the 'nepotism'. First, government offices could adopt a policy of affirmative action to allow 'outsiders' to enter the system. Second, the government could also take strong measures to put pressure on the powerful Federation of Employers to limit the percentage of graduates of certain universities in their recruitment. Consequently, employers would rely more on what applicants have studied at universities and less on their origin.

Another possible measure would be a 'university zone' system in order to adjust the clear hierarchy. Although it may not work as well as the 'high school zone system' did, due to the concentration of private universities in metropolitan areas, some changes could be expected. Third, admission to universities could be based on both examination, performance and individual experiences at secondary school level.

(2) HIGHER EDUCATION

1. 'CERTIFICATE WITHOUT EDUCATION'.

Education in Japanese universities is relatively undemanding (Pempel, 1971, Kitamura et.al., 1972, Chapman, 1981 and Reischauer,

1977). Once one is admitted to a university, it is not difficult to graduate in 4 years. It is degrees not 'education' in the form of skills and knowledge, that is important. The function of university seems to have become 'social selection' rather than 'education'.

There are several factors creating this 'Certificate without education' tendency. Firstly, employers are more concerned with the university which a student has attended than what he or she actually did at university, since they provide their own extensive on-the-job training. The process of recruitment consists in most cases of a paper test on 'general knowledge' and an interview. A survey in 1975 (Nihon Recruit Centre, 1975) shows that only 12 percent of the personnel officers agree with the statement 'college graduates have superior specialisation' while 39 percent disagree. And 54 percent agree with the statement that 'college graduates have sufficient sociability and cooperativity'.

Secondly, parents of students believe their children deserve a break and a chance to have fun after the strenuous examination. Thirdly, within the university, both students and their teachers tend to be more occupied with other activities such as leisure, club activities and meetings for students while research and public lectures for teachers. As a result, a marriage of convenience has developed where neither of them make great demands on each other (Kitamura et.al., 1972: 312). Fourthly, facilities are relatively poor at Japanese universities (especially private institutions). This is an outcome of poor finance at private institutions as will be discussed in the next section.

2. POOR FINANCE

Private universities seriously suffer from the poor finance. A study (Ichikawa, 1978) indicates that Japanese private institutions have significantly less finance than that of universities in other advanced nations, while public ones are financed relatively well. Table shows how educational facilities at private institutions are poorer than those at public ones. This is mainly due to the difference in access to public financial sources. Private institutions derive only 14.5 percent of their expenditure from the public purse whereas

national ones are subsidised at the level of 96.4 percent.

It is important to note that 76.8 percent of university students are at private institutions and that 77.9 percent of all higher education institutions are private (Ministry of Education, 1982). This means that most of the students study under poor conditions and that they pay more for poorer education.

Besides the dual structure of private and public institutions, access to public resources differs greatly even among national universities, where old and prestigious universities receive more finance (Ichikawa, 1978).

This underinvestment phenomenon is a result of the process of higher education development after the war. The increased social demand for higher education was satisfied by the expansion of the private sector, not by the public sector. The expansion of the private sector was made possible by the rapid economic growth of the 1960s which raised income levels. It is the 'two-sector structure' which enabled Japanese higher education to expand rapidly while preserving a few old national universities for high quality of education and research. The government, unable to afford the entire burden of expense for higher education, allowed too many institutions to become 'universities' on the basis of easy conditions.

Although the Law for institutional aid to private schools was passed in 1975, equality between the two sectors is still a long way off. The number of universities should not be increased. Government could impose up-graded minimum conditions in terms of facility and budgets on universities, and check them regularly. If the conditions are not satisfied, university status could be withdrawn.

3. ISOLATION AND LOW MOBILITY

Japanese universities are isolated at three levels; at the inter-departmental level within each university; at the inter-university level within Japan; and at the international level.

The number of foreign teachers and students at Japanese universities are significantly small. Only 0.59 percent of total staff in 1976 were foreign teachers, most of them being foreign language teachers. Since the Japanese government in 1953 ruled that only Japanese nationals could become senior teaching personnel at national institutions, foreign teachers have been able to obtain only the status of 'foreign teacher' or 'assistant' (Kobayashi, 1979: 180). It was only in 1979 that the law revision was approved and it was not until 1982 that a foreign teacher was appointed as a senior teacher-associate professor at Kyoto University.

The number of foreign students is very small in relation to university capacity. In 1976 there were only 5,671 foreign students excluding Korean permanent residents in Japan. Seventy six percent come from Asia and most of them major in engineering and sciences (Kobayashi, 1979: 173). One factor preventing students from coming to Japan to study is the language problem. All universities use Japanese as the instruction language except for a few private universities, and they usually require students to take a half-year intensive language course before they can start their major fields. Another is that other countries have difficulty in evaluating Japanese degrees due to the differing calibres of universities and due, too, to the fact that they have little experience of graduates of Japanese universities.

The limited movement of scholars and students is also a characteristic observed among universities. Shimbori (1978) explains this phenomenon by pursuing 'Gakubatsu' (academic cliquism) which is very prevalent. In hiring and selecting university staff, preferential treatment is always given to school alumni, resulting in in-breeding. For example, an extensive research of full-time staff in pedagogy shows that 95 percent of teachers at Tokyo University are school alumni, and at Kyoto University the proportion is 90 percent.

Even within an individual campus, little interchange takes place. Schools and departments tend to be mutually exclusive (Shimbori, 1981: 241). This is probably one of the outcomes of respected autonomy of chairs. The tendency remains stronger at older universities.

Some recent events indicate a possibility of improvement. The establishment of the United Nation University Headquarter in Tokyo gives some hope of an increased flow of scholars. The first English-speaking graduate university 'Kokusai Daigaku' (International University) is mainly funded by industrial circles and began to accept students from April, 1983. It offers a quota for foreign students. However, academic cliquism will be slow to fade, unless the central Ministry of Education takes innovatory measures in hiring teachers at each university, and this is most unlikely to happen in the forseeable future. For, Japanese universities and intellectuals have traditionally been strongly in favour of the principle of 'university autonomy' (Marshall explains this tendency in historical context. 1977).

III. CONCLUSION

The two issues discussed here are only a portion of the whole problems which Japanese education has had.

Minorities, i.e. Ainus, Korean residents, Burakumin (social outcasts) have not benefitted from the expansion as much as they could have, due to the covert discrimination against them exercised in society. Cumming's argument over the egalitarian tendency of Japanese education and society (1980) has not included these minority groups. Involuntary attendance at high school level is another issue, resulting sometimes in violent actions against others.

Expansion has contributed to development by producing more 'educated' and 'disciplined' people, i.e. a productive workforce. It was fortunate that the workforce could be absorbed by the industries which had begun to 'take off'. Furthermore, the expansion of education was reinforced by the increased income level as a result of the economic growth at the time. Consequently, it came to involve more and more people in the competitive race to better universities. In other words, expansion of education meant expansion of competitive race involving more people than ever. Being preoccupied with preparation for the upper schools, Japanese education seems to have forgotten the task of achieving the full development of the 'individuals'.

Expansion of education does not necessarily bring happiness to all people if the education itself is not appropriate. Expansion of education in Japan might have been appropriate for the 'industrialisation' of the nation, but not for individual development. However, many developing countries appear to believe in educational expansion regardless of its appropriateness to the nation, even, not to mention to individuals.

TABLE: Comparison of Educational Conditions in National and Private Institutions, 1975.

Educational Condition	National Colleges and Universities	Private Colleges and Universities
Student-teacher ratio (full-time teacher)	11.7	41.0
Number of students per non-teaching staff member	6.7	27.3
Floor space per student	26.4 sq.m.	8.7 sq.m.
School site space per student	83.4 sq.m.	29.5 sq.m.
Educational expenditure per student	909,000 yen	343,000 yen
Number of library books per student	109.4	26.6

(Ichikawa, 1979: 57)

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